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Night of the Wolves



by David G. Hulan



PART 2 SYNOPSIS

Dovid, a Jewish traveling acrobat in early 19th-century Russia, is escorting Rivke, the only surviving member of a family who had befriended him in the city of Zhitomir in the Ukraine, to the home of her uncle in Lublin. They are traveling by public sleigh when

Rivke tugged at my sleeve. "Dovid, while you were talking to the man at that first cottage I was looking around and I saw what looked like a deserted barn or something of the sort off on the opposite side of it from the rest of the village. Do you think maybe we could use it to shelter us from the wind and..." she looked over her shoulder in the direction from which the last howl had come.

"Good!" I exclaimed. "I'm glad at least one of us is keeping her eyes open! Let's take a look." We hurried back down the path past the cottages, conscious that from some of them hostile eyes were staring at us. But I didn't think they would object to our using an abandoned building--not enough to brave the storm and the wolves to do anything about it.

The darkness was almost impenetrable, but directly an even denser black loomed beside us and we groped our way through the doorway of some kind of building. I had a small oil lamp and a flask of whale-oil in my bag, and with some effort I succeeded in lighting it. By its illumination I studied our shelter--such as it was. The thatch of the roof was missing in several places, but as nearly as I could tell the basic structure was sound enough, and none of the gaps was large enough to admit a wolf. The walls were of good solid stonework; a hurricane couldn't have moved them. That left the door through which we had entered and a small square window. The latter had two crude bars in it, but a tentative tug snapped one and the other gave way with little more effort. I turned from it in disgust and looked to the door. There was a door, but it had come off its hinges and lay on the floor. I lifted one end of it and kicked it. It seemed sound enough, so I heaved it off the floor and jammed it in place in the doorway.

"Here, lean on this," I called to Rivke. She walked over and leaned back against it, dropping her head onto her chest and closing her eyes.

"It feels good to just relax," she murmured.

Meanwhile I was rummaging in my bag for something useful. I found what I wanted finally--a set of metal hooks and the reel of wire cable that I used sometimes for tight-wire work. With a loose rock I drove the hooks into cracks in the stone walls; then I cross-strung the cable from hook to hook until there was no more of it. I didn't think the wolves would be able to knock the door down, at least. But the window was

wolves begin chasing it. The others in the sleigh want to throw the Jews to the wolves, but they jump first and get up into a tree before they are caught.

The wolves mostly follow the sleigh, but one wolf stays behind. With considerable effort Dovid & Rivke kill the wolf and make it to a nearby village. However, the Ukrainian peasants refuse to give them shelter, and as the first installment ends they hear the howling of wolves again approaching.

going to be a different story. As far as I could see, there was nothing to block it with. I was looking around desperately, trying to think of something, when Rivke again came to the rescue.

"Do you have any more wire, or rope, or anything like that?" she asked.

"I have some light rope, but no more hooks, so I don't see how it would help," I answered.

"Well, your bag is longer than that window is wide, and almost as tall as it is high. If you tied a rope to its handles, and then shoved it out the window and pulled it up so it was crosswise of the window..."

"And I stand here all night playing tug-of-war with the wolves. It's a nice idea, but I can't last that long. Might as well let them come through one at a time and see if I can kill them as fast as they come in."



"No!" she snapped. "I want no more killing. But you don't have to hold on to the rope. Tie it around the handles of my bag and then sit on the bag. I can sit on it too; there's room. They won't move the two of us."

I looked at her for a moment in undisguised admiration. Then I hastily dug the rope out of my bag and did as she had suggested. The whole sequence of actions was punctuated by louder and louder howls as the wolves came steadily closer. By the time the rope was tightened to my satisfaction and we were both seated fairly comfortably on her bag with our backs to the wall, the howling was almost directly outside.

Then the door sagged inward against the cable as a heavy body thudded against it. But the cable was designed to hold much greater loads than that; it hardly vibrated. The thuds continued for a few minutes, but when



they achieved no success they ceased. The howling went away then, and Rivke whispered, "Do you think they've gone for good?"

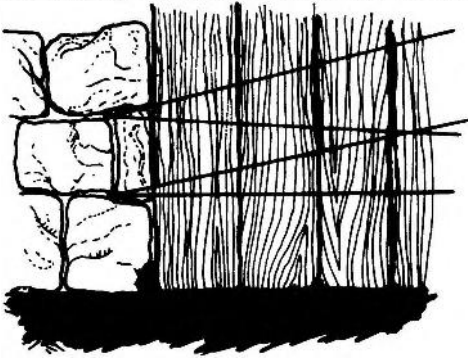
"I doubt it," I answered. "They're probably trying the rest of the village first, but if they can't get in anywhere they'll be back here. They know this place is weaker than the others."

She shivered. It was cold; my exertions in fortifying the place had kept me warm, but Rivke hadn't had that and also had the disadvantage of being much smaller. I didn't have a blanket in my bag--I mostly used it for apparatus--but there was a chance that Rivke had one in hers. I asked her.

"I have," she said. "Do you think we can afford to get up and open it?"

"I think we have to take the chance. You'll freeze--maybe both of us will--without it. You keep sitting on the bag until I've stood up and am holding my bag up with the rope. Then open it and get your blanket out as quick as you can."

I stood up and braced myself against the wall, holding the rope tight in both hands. Rivke jumped up and after a little fumbling with numbed fingers worked the catch on her bag and got it open. She tugged out a blanket--a good heavy wool one--slammed the bag shut, and flopped down on it again. I exhaled slowly and sank back down to it myself.



She was busily trying to arrange the blanket to cover both of us when I took a hand in it. "The object, my dear, is to present as little area as possible to the outside. That means that whether you like it or not, you should get as close to me as you can. Especially your hands and arms--fold them across your chest and keep them between us." She curled up into as small a volume as I've ever seen an adult manage, and I curled myself around her and then with one hand lapped a double layer of blanket over us both. It wasn't bad at all. In fact, it occurred to me that it was exceedingly pleasant...and at about that time, a muffled voice came from the region of my shoulder, saying, "Why shouldn't I like it?"

"Like what?" So I was fishing...

"Like getting as close to you as I can," she answered sleepily. Then she burrowed a little closer yet and was silent. I



pressed my arms against her back to help, and closed my eyes. I must have dozed, because the next thing I knew the bag we were sitting on was jerking spasmodically and there was an angry growling and snarling outside the window. Rivke woke up with a reflexive jump, and fell off the bag in the process. I fortunately was able to keep my seat and grabbed the rope to give a little more security.

"They're back!" she said unnecessarily.

"And trying hard to get in," I answered. "We'll have to hope that my bag is tough enough to last until they give up. It's thick leather, but wolves' teeth are made for cutting animal hides, so...we'll have to see."

Rivke shook her head and returned to her seat on the bag. "I hope they can't get in. It's not just that I don't want to die, either; I know you could kill more than one of them with that knife before they got us, and I don't want that to happen either. I can still see that poor old wolf in the forest..." Her voice broke and she tucked her head into my shoulder again. I put my arm around her and drew her closer. Then I picked up the blanket and draped it back over us.

"I'm not cold any more," she said. "You know how to keep a girl warm nights."

"Rivke, if we--" I started, and then broke off.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing. Only if we ever get to Lublin, there's something I want to ask you..."

"I can wait," she murmured. "Just don't forget about it when we get there--especially if it's what I think." And with that cryptic remark she fell silent once more.

Within a few minutes the jerking of the bag ceased. Apparently the wolves had decided that my bag was too tough for them to break through in any reasonable time. They had not given up, though. As they left the window, they renewed their assault on the door. I wasn't worried about the cable holding--it could have held up the whole pack with strength to spare--but the hooks that I had driven into the wall were another story. I could only hope that they would not pull loose under the repeated onslaughts of the pack.

As each heavy body hit the door it sagged inward slightly, only to be snapped back into place by the springiness of the cable. And gradually I could see that the door was moving farther and farther inward with each stroke. The hooks must indeed be giving way. Finally I could see a small gap

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Wolves FROM PAGE 7

opening at the edge of the door each time a wolf impacted it, although it closed again instantly. But it grew bigger with each impact, and I bent my head to Rivke and said, "We're in trouble if they keep that up. They've quit attacking the window, so you sit tight here while I go over there and see what I can do."

I got up and crept over to the door. And if God didn't answer my prayers it was as if He had. As one of the wolves hurled himself against the door, another was apparently scratching at the edge, because when the door bowed inward a hairy grey paw slid through the crack--to be caught viciously when the cables snapped the door back. The wolf let out a heart-rending yelp of agony, but I was too interested in my own survival to feel much sympathy for him. He continued to make a great commotion, struggling to free himself--but the assault on the door ceased. And minutes later we heard the howling of the wolf-pack fading away in the distance, as they decided to seek easier prey. Finally, when the sound had faded completely from our ears, I drew my knife and slashed down on the wolf's paw, severing it neatly at the edge of the door-jamb. The door snapped back fully shut, and we could hear the agonized yapping of the wolf as he bolted away from us.

"Did you have to do that?" Rivke asked angrily.

"Unless you wanted to have him waiting for us in the morning," I answered. "By then I'd have no choice but to kill him. He'll be in pain for a while, but probably no longer than he would have been with a crushed paw in the first place. And he only lost some toes; he'll probably live to kill other men yet."

She was silent for a moment, pensive. Then she looked at me with an innocent expression and said, "I'm getting cold again."



The morning sun shone through the holes in the roof. The storm of the preceding night had apparently been a brief one. I shook Rivke and she uncurled and stretched, yawning. "What now?" she asked.

"We try to reach the next village. It shouldn't be more than five or six versts from here. And it's on the main road, so there's probably some kind of transportation for hire that can get us to the next place where we can get a sleigh to Lublin."

"But what about the wolves?"

"They aren't usually out too much in the daytime--only late in the afternoon. I'm not thrilled with the prospect of walking that far through the forest, but I don't see any choice. In fact, we'd better leave before those peasants decide to see if we have anything they want to keep." And I rose and began dismantling our defenses of the night just past. Being in the theatrical business gets one used to packing quickly; I had things ready to go by the time Rivke had finished scrubbing her face with some snow that had drifted through the window and had run a comb through her hair.

"In case we run into a wolf who likes his food to look appetizing as well as taste that way?" I asked, cocking an eyebrow at her.

She made a face but slid the comb back into the pocket of her coat.

I lifted both the bags and we set out, circling through an edge of the woods to reach the road without passing in view of most of the cottages. Then we made our way down a rutted, ill-kept path, more a clear path through the trees than a real road. Less than a verst along it, however, we struck a better road, apparently the main road that intersected the one we had first been travelling on at the next village. Our spirits picked up as the way opened in front of us. Rivke was humming a little tune, and I was whistling under my breath, when I heard the jingle of bells and a moment later the clomp of horses' feet behind us.

Rivke looked at me. "Trouble?" she said, apparently noting my frown.

"I don't know. It might be. If the driver is like most of the natives, it's trouble right enough, if he sees us. Not but what I could probably take care of him, but there'd be the law to think of. On the other hand, he might be friendly--might even be Jewish--and if so he could save us a long walk at least and possibly even being caught by the wolves again."

"So what do we do?"

"We can hide, and take our chances on the wolves, or stand here and take our chances on the man. I've had more attractive choices."

"So choose one!"

At about that instant a faint howling came to me on the breeze. At least, I think I heard it. Even now, I'm not sure. But it made up my mind. "We stand here. Most people who own sleighs are fairly prosperous, and they're not usually as bad as the peasants. Even if he isn't friendly at least there's a good chance he'll just leave us alone."

So we stopped and stood at the side of the road while the jingling and hoofbeats drew nearer. Then the sleigh came around the last bend in the road--a one-horse sleigh with the driver so swathed in furs that it was impossible to tell anything about his appearance even when he came even with us and drew up his horse.



"What are you two doing walking through this forest? Don't you know there are wolves out?" he asked. He was Ukrainian from his accent, but not of the peasant class. I took a chance.

"We were passengers on the public sleigh, travelling from Zhitomir to Lublin. Wolves were chasing it, so they put us off to lighten the sleigh. We took shelter for the night in an abandoned barn near a village up a side road, and now we're trying to get to where we can book a passage the rest of the way to Lublin."

The two bright eyes that were all I could see for the heavy furs and thick beard flashed incredulously. "They put you off the sleigh? A girl?"

"We're Jews," I replied tonelessly.

"My people!" he snorted, exasperated. "Well, don't just stand there, get in the sleigh. I can't make up for all you must have been through, but at least I can give you a ride to the village."

I heaved the bags into the back of the sleigh and helped Rivke to mount onto the seat. Then I swung myself up beside her and the driver clucked to his horse and we started off.

"Thank you, sir," I began.

"No need. When I think of the way people who call themselves Christians behave toward other children of God...well, I don't need to talk to you about that! I can only beg forgiveness on their behalf. Most of my people are miserably poor and ignorant, and the government--and God forgive them, most of the leaders of the Church--want to keep them that way. And they use your people to distract the peasants from their own problems." He was obviously warming to his subject--I suppose he seldom had a chance to air his views where he knew they wouldn't be reported.

"There are a few of us--unfortunately far too few--in the Church who try to persuade our people to treat yours with common courtesy, at least. We may disagree with you, but we know you aren't devils. Sadly, we seem to be fighting a losing battle."

"You said 'us'--are you a priest, then?" I asked suspiciously. I had known

several priests in my day, and all of them had spent a large part of their time stirring up their congregations against Jews.

He seemed to recognize the tone of my voice, because he answered, "Guilty, I'm afraid. But really, not all priests are so bad. The trouble is that most of us share either the peasant ignorance or the aristocratic Machiavellian outlook, because most of us are born either peasants or aristocrats. Unfortunately most of the men of intelligence and good will in Russia don't want to be priests--in fact, I'm sorry to say that most of them don't believe in God at all. Sometimes, looking at Russia, I can't blame them..." He fell silent. Rivke nudged me.

"What was he saying?" she whispered. "I could understand a little, but not all."

"He's a priest," I whispered back, "but I don't think he's either out to convert us or wishing us harm. He seems a good man." She had started slightly at my first words, but relaxed when I reassured her.

The sleigh made short work of the few versts we had to go; it was only a few minutes after we had stopped talking that we drew up in front of an inn. "Here you are," said the driver. "You can book passage here--and the proprietor of this inn is Jewish, so he should be able to advise you better than I can."

I helped Rivke down and unloaded our bags. Then I extended my hand to the priest. "Thank you, sir. And--it's good to know there are at least some like you in the Russian Church."

He took my hand, smiled, then touched his brow and turned, clucking to his horse. As we stood watching him drive away Rivke moved closer to me. "Dovid..." she said.

"What?"

"What was it you were going to ask me?"

I smiled down at her. "We're not in Lublin yet."



Blackbird Pie FROM PAGE 9
was on her knees kissing the edge of Clarissa's gown.

"Oh, do stop!" said Clarissa, hauling the girl to her feet. "There is a condition."

Joan nodded, her eyes bright with unshed tears.

"You must bring with you tomorrow a simple dress, such as you wear--we are close enough in size--which I will keep hidden here and while you work I will skip out to the garden in it. If anyone should come and ask you, you shall say that I forced you, and you'll come to no blame. Will you do this?"

Joan nodded again. Clarissa clapped her hands and spun around with excitement.

"Ah, Joan, Joan, you are a friend! Go now with the tea so that my nurse will suspect nothing. She

handed Joan the keys. "Remember that you must lock me in when you go. Oh, what a romp we shall have tomorrow!"



That evening the court buzzed with talk of the day's hunt. Clarissa, seated beside the Grand Duke, toyed with her food for once in a true ladylike fashion, for the tea had filled her up considerably. She had come to the great hall in high spirits, but her good humor had been speedily quashed by the news that she was to play that night week for the Duke, who was especially fond of the lute. Queen Elianora, outwardly gracious, had despaired on hearing this, and had berated her daughter more roundly than usual when she delivered the message. Cla-

rissa, who was less particular about hiding her feelings, went promptly into a fit of sulkiness and was now glowering outrageously, to the Duke's distress. Until tonight she had been friendly to him and he could not understand how he had offended her. Clarissa actually rather liked the Grand Duke, although she had no intention of accepting his suit: he was farsighted to an appalling degree, which required him to gaze at his surroundings through a large crystal which he shifted from eye to eye to divide the strain. Clarissa had only once seen both eyes at a time, and having been too close for him to focus upon her properly, had decided that she did not fancy a husband who could only see her clearly at a distance of over fifty paces. Besides, his name was Archibald. Archibald! Also he had told her quite frankly that he considered five chil-